

Mimar Sinan's Originality in the Mosques of Rüstem Paşa and Sokollu Mehmet Paşa

Henry Matthews

Mimar Sinan (1491? - 1588) is well known as the Chief Court Architect of Süleyman the Magnificent and of his son Selim II. His fifty-year career as *mimarbaşı* (1538-1588) dominates Ottoman architecture in the sixteenth century. Three imperial mosques and associated *külliyes* stand as peaks of his achievement. The Şehzade Mosque (1543-48), which he modestly described as 'the work of my apprenticeship,' shows early success in his search for ideal form¹; the Süleymaniye Mosque (1550-57) confirms his mastery of structure and space on a colossal scale; and the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne (1568-75) leaves no question as to his architectural genius. Fusing art and engineering in a manner rarely equaled in the history of architecture, he created a luminous space beneath a vast dome supported on eight slender piers.

Also under royal patronage, Sinan designed a mosque for Süleyman's beloved wife Haseki Hürrem, better known in the west as Roxelana, and two for his favorite daughter Mihrimah Sultan. The Valide Sultan Nur Banu, the First *Kadın* of Selim II, commissioned one of the architect's last mosques in Üsküdar. Each of these was original in its architectural form. But Sinan also demonstrated his bold originality in mosques for court officials, generals and admirals of the Ottoman navy. Those that he created for the two most powerful grand viziers of his era, Rüstem Paşa in 1562 and Sokollu Mehmet Paşa in 1572 are among his most innovative. They are pivotal works in the career of an architect with a passion for experimentation.

The mosques also stand in testimony to the manner in which Sinan's architecture expressed his patrons' power and wealth, while proclaiming their piety. Thus they gained recognition as benefactors who endowed pious foundations for the public good. Even before the mosques discussed in this article were built, both Rüstem Paşa and Sokollu Mehmet Paşa were known for mosques, medreses, hamams, and caravanserais bearing their names in several cities. Indeed only Süleyman himself is associated with more buildings designed by Sinan than the two grand viziers.² Both men were married to sultan's daughters, and therefore possessed extra prestige and influence.

Rüstem Paşa, who came from a poor Bosnian family, rose to his exalted position through the *Devşirme* system. With the exception of a two-year period, he wielded enormous power as grand vizier from 1544 to his death in 1561. He has come down in history as a brutal and avaricious man who amassed a huge fortune in loot from military campaigns and various nefarious schemes. He is perhaps best known for his role in the plot hatched with Roxelana in 1453 to ensure the succession of her son Selim. Together they convinced Süleyman that his favorite son Mustafa was planning to usurp the throne. With intense sadness the sultan ordered Mustafa's strangulation and ended the promising life of his heir. Mustafa's popularity with the army and Rüstem Paşa's obvious involvement in his demise caused Rüstem Paşa to relinquish his viziership, but two years later he resumed the position. Five years after his death the unattractive and drunken Selim followed his father onto the throne.

Since Rüstem Paşa was Grand Vizier during the seven years that it took to build the Süleymaniye mosque, he must have played an important role in the management of the project, not least by controlling the funds for its construction. He also worked closely with Sinan on the mosque in Beşiktaş for his own brother Sinan Paşa who died before its completion. Despite his unsavory

activities Rüstem Paşa made some significant contributions to Ottoman culture. He is credited with the promotion and support of the textile and ceramic tile industries that brought great artistry to the palaces, mosques and tombs of sixteenth century Istanbul. It is therefore appropriate that the Rüstem Paşa Camii is sumptuously ornamented with Iznik tiles.

During his second term of office, Rustem Paşa acquired the site for his mosque in Eminönü, the busy commercial area between the port on the Golden Horn and the Grand Bazaar. For mercenary reasons he chose this location, rather than a more peaceful place where a freestanding structure could be admired from several viewpoints. His entrepreneurial instincts encouraged him to make sure that the mosque would produce income in perpetuity, so that its maintenance would not be a drain on his purse. To that end he raised it up above a full story of shops and hans, whose rents provided a substantial endowment. Although the dome of the mosque is easily visible from the Galata Bridge and the shore of Eminönü, one could easily pass by it in the narrow Uzunçarşı Caddesi without being aware of its presence. An upwards glance over the goods displayed outside small shops reveals an elegant arcade that gives a hint of the sacred space above. At street level, unassuming arches lead to two enclosed staircases that take the visitor from the crowded and clamorous market to the seclusion of the mosque precinct.

Sinan, responding to different topography and townscape, had always varied the approaches to his mosques; in this case he designed a powerful sequence of spatial experiences. From the colorful bustle of the street, one passes into a dark staircase and after making a few turns, emerges into the daylight. In contrast with the constriction of the staircase, the space in front of the mosque appears generous. As at the Iskele Cami in Üsküdar, built by Sinan for Mihrimah Sultan fifteen years earlier, a low-pitched roof over the porch extends forward to rest its eaves on a second row of arches, creating a sense of broad shelter. Beyond this lies an area open to the sky, defined on its other side by the third arcade visible from the street below. The architect has created three distinct zones. One moves from the sunshine of the elevated forecourt into the shade of the outer porch, then to the inner porch that is raised up to denote its more sacred nature. Although the light here is more subdued, the walls are resplendent with brilliant, predominantly blue, ceramic tiles. On each side of the central door a niche, also lined with blue tiles acts as a secondary *mihrab*. Worshippers frequently pray on this raised platform. Although they are no more than a stone's throw from the secular market below, Sinan has defined a religious domain for them.

The ceramic tiles on the inner wall of the porch are only a foretaste of the brilliance within. Prior to the construction of this mosque, only royal tombs, as if to convey an image of paradise, were completely lined with tiles. But Rüstem Paşa, despite his many despicable acts, appears to have claimed his place in paradise in his mosque. He gave the interior an unprecedented richness by lining it, up to the base of the dome, with Iznik tiles, and the same material adorns the pendentives. Despite Rüstem's power and wealth, there were limits to what could be built in his name. Only a sultan could build more than one minaret, and a very large dome would have suggested arrogant competition with the sultan, but Sinan compensated for the modest span of the dome by making it high.

The true originality in this mosque lies in the structure. This is Sinan's first octagonal mosque, and it can be appreciated as a step on the way to his greatest architectural achievement, the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, whose dome is supported on eight piers. The architect may have first considered the potential of an eight-point support system in the Byzantine Church of Ss. Sergius and Bacchus (ca. 526) that stands close to the Bosphorus shore not far from the Sultan Ahmet Mosque. But, just as he never imitated Hagia Sophia directly, he only used the Byzantine example as a departure point. While Ss. Sergius and Bacchus was planned as an octagon within a

square, surrounded by a continuous ambulatory, the eight supports of Rüstem Paşa Mosque stand within a rectangle. In this case the dome is supported on four freestanding piers and four buttresses of the same dimension projecting from the walls. Aisles on the two sides expand the interior space laterally, but the *qibla* wall with the mihrab appears close to the main entrance. Since all the surfaces of the walls and piers are covered with tiles, they merge together as part of an all encompassing whole. However, at the upper level decoration emphasizes the structure. The polychrome voussoirs of the arches and the tiled roundels of calligraphy in the pendentives draw attention to the structural system. These roundels bear the names of Allah, Muhammad, and the first four caliphs, as well as Hassan and Husein.

The Rüstem Paşa Mosque was built at the peak of quality in the Iznik workshops. Using the underglaze technique the craftsmen executed bold, mostly floral designs that stand out clearly against a white background. While, earlier in the sixteenth century, flowers and arabesques were subtly intertwined in continuous, somewhat abstract patterns, the individual flowers here can be identified. Designs often strike a balance between botanically accurate representation and fantasy. The tulips with their red petals, coming together at a point are particularly striking in contrast to the predominant blues. These tulips prefigure the eighteenth century obsession with tulips that gave the period its name as the 'Tulip Age.' The formula for the brilliant red glaze used here for the first time has never been rediscovered. A strong characteristic of the tiles is the use of sinuous lines, running through the designs. It appears that different teams of craftsmen were responsible for the various walls without much coordination, and certain areas seem to involve a change of plan. In some places, particularly on the porch, there are careless repairs after an earthquake. However the flowering tree motifs in the *mihrab* and at the top of the *minber* are spectacular. Rüstem Paşa never lived to see his mosque built. It was completed after his death by his wife Mihrimah Sultan.

Sokollu Mehmet Paşa, the son of a Christian priest in Bosnia, also passed through the *devşirme* system and, using his personal magnetism, as well as his brilliant mind, was able to realize his full potential. As a servant of the royal household, he progressed from page-boy to falconer royal, *beylerbey* of Rumelia, grand admiral, and finally Süleyman's last grand vizier. Like Rüstem Paşa he was also instrumental in ensuring the succession of Selim II. When Süleyman, old and sick, died during the siege of Sziget in Hungary, Sokollu concealed his death and brought his body back to Istanbul in a covered litter. Selim traveled rapidly from Kutaha to join them near Belgrade, so that he could enter Istanbul with his dead father. Thus a possible rebellion was limited to a few skirmishes in the city, which Sokollu was able to quell. By his ability to control the situation, Sokollu not only helped the unpopular Selim gain the throne, but also made sure of his own position. For the next thirteen years, while Selim devoted himself to drinking and the pleasures of the harem, Sokollu effectively ran the empire, and did his best to sustain a moderating influence on the sultan. His marriage to Selim's daughter, Esmahan Sultan also strengthened his position. He even survived after the humiliating defeat, in 1571 at the Battle of Lepanto when the fleet of a triple alliance of Spain, Venice and the Papacy, commanded by Don John of Austria, routed the Ottoman navy with a loss of 280 ships and 30,000 lives.

Sinan skillfully fitted Sokollu's mosque onto the steep slope southwest of the Hippodrome by raising the buildings on the north side of the court. A steep flight of steps, leading up to the street below on the main axis gives a framed view of the beautiful fountain. The lightness and elegance of the mosque, built a year after the defeat at Lepanto, rises above the gravity of the times. This was the last of Sinan's designs with a dome supported on six arches, and the most successful. Having played a series of variations on this structural system, using either four or six piers to help support the dome, he eliminated the piers altogether and carried the dome on buttresses attached to the walls. The effect is serene and spacious. If Sokollu was trying to outdo Rüstem Paşa, his

approach was in a spirit of moderation. The walls and piers are of plain, pale, honey colored stone, but in contrast, the qibla wall under the south arch, is entirely covered, except for the stone mihrab, with fine Iznik tiles. The roundels flanking the top of the mihrab and those in the pendentives, with white inscriptions on blue backgrounds, show the combination of abstract decoration and calligraphy at its best. To either side of the qibla wall, two arches open out into the corners of the rectangular space. Since the dome is very high, the arches seem tall and graceful. The view up into the dome is made particularly attractive by the predominantly blue tiles in the pendentives, which make a star shape around its base. The six arches seem to flow together in a continuous circular motion.

Sokollu Mehmet Paşa must have played an important role in the planning and erection of the Selimiye Camii in Edirne. Working with Sinan at the height of his powers, he was able to ensure that the sultan, whatever his shortcomings, would build the finest mosque in Ottoman history. Both Sokollu and Sinan were fortunate to be able to devote the rich resources of the Empire to such a sublime architectural cause. Few architects, even those building for the Vatican or for powerful European kings, were able to realize their ambitions with so little financial constraint. Indeed, one could adapt a remark that Sokollu made to the admiral, Kiliç Ali Paşa, who doubted that a hundred and fifty new ships could be fitted out quickly after the naval defeat at Lepanto, to describe the procurement of fine materials for a mosque. “The power and resources of the Sublime Porte are so infinite that, if the order was given, it would be possible to obtain ropes of silk and sails of satin...”³

Mimar Sinan was clearly not concerned with the character of his patrons. That Rüstem Paşa was a devious and often evil man, and that Selim II was known for his debauched way of life, as “Selim the Sot,” was of no account to him. His sole concern was to learn from his experiments and reach new heights in architecture. The ambitions of Süleyman and Selim combined with the skillful management of their grand viziers, and the resources of the empire, gave him opportunities that no contemporary European architect enjoyed.⁴ Nevertheless, the characters of Rüstem Paşa and Sokollu Mehmet Paşa are reflected in their mosques. The Rüstem Paşa Camii is the only one whose walls and piers are entirely covered with Iznik tiles. Although the effect appears brilliant to most visitors, it breaks with the tradition of a more sparing use of tiles on mosques. Aptullah Kuran, considering the design “incompatible with the general principles of Ottoman Classical architecture,” accused Rüstem rather than Sinan of excess.⁵ The Sokollu Mehmet Paşa Camii certainly gained from the architect’s added maturity, but its patron was a more subtle man. The brilliance of the structural design and the beauty of the space take first place and Iznik tiles of the highest quality add brilliance to the interior without dominating the architecture. It seems as if Sinan, who had much to gain from the favor of the two men, rewarded them with two of his finest experiments in light, space and structure.

Henry Matthews is Professor Emeritus of architectural history at Washington State University. He has published on late nineteenth century American Architecture, European modernism and Ottoman architecture. His book *Space, Light and Structure, The Essential Guide to the Mosques of Istanbul* will be published this year by the Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, Istanbul in collaboration with Scala Publishers, London.

¹ See Henry Matthews, “Concepts of Ideal Form in Istanbul and Rome: the Sacred Architecture of Sinan and his Italian Contemporaries,” in *Istanbul: Annual Supplement of Arkeoloji ve Sanat Magazine*, ed Neziha Başgelen & Brian Johnson, Istanbul 2002.

² A complete, alphabetic list of known projects is shown in appendix I of Aptullah Kuran, *Sinan: the Grand Old Master of Ottoman Architecture*, Institute of Turkish Studies, Washington D.C. and ADA Press, Istanbul 1987

³ Andre Clot, *Süleyman the Magnificent The Man, his Life, his Epoch*, Translated by Matthew J. Reisz, Saqi Books, London 1992, p.108.

⁴ The two greatest domed structures of Renaissance Italy, Filippo Brunelleschi's Florence Cathedral and Michelangelo's St. Peter's Rome were both built on existing substructures. Neither architect lived to see completion of the project.

⁵ Aptullah Kuran *Sinan: the Grand Old Master of Ottoman Architecture*, p. 249